



Christmas Day (I)

Uncountable

[RCL] Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

They came to be counted.

This is where it begins: Joseph and Mary, just two of many in the teeming, trembling, transcendent history of their people, traveling the well-worn roads of their ancestors and coming, at last, to Bethlehem, the city of King David.

They came to be registered in a census decreed by a ruler with a different name and a foreign throne—one who knew few of their number, and who had likely never stood where they stood or stopped to consider the centuries of blood and prayer and supplication that cried out from the many stones of their particular wilderness.

But nonetheless they obeyed, this man and this woman, and they came to be counted. Counted among the multitude of faces, both familiar and strange, in a place that barely felt like home. Counted as two, though a third was on the way. Counted as fixed commodities of an empire that did not suspect and could not comprehend the infinite possibility carried in their flesh—a child, yes, but also a long history of survival, and an ancient promise of dignity yet to be delivered in its fullness. A fullness that will not and cannot be commodified or controlled. A fullness that is a story, not a sum.

And although that story has shaped us and brought us here today, it is safe to say that we are still caught up in the process of counting. We are a people encircled by an empire of metrics and measures, whether for economies or households or faith communities or even our own bodies. This is understandable to a certain extent. We pursue the stability and the clarity that numbers offer. We want an objective proclamation of what is real, even if we can't decide what to do about it.

But it is also true, especially evident in recent times, that numbers alone cannot save or solve our most urgent and fundamental questions. We can count, and count, and count some more, and order census after census and survey after survey to track our shared challenges, but in the face of deep spiritual hunger and anger and grief and change, the power of these numbers is limited. They can be idolized or distorted or ignored. At their worst, they become weapons rather than tools, used to shape arguments rather than

reveal truth. Like the empires that wield them, numbers can be useful in the project of uniformity, but they are insufficient for the pursuit of salvation.

No, as we travel the well-worn roads of our own ancestors, something else must be revealed to us, something else must arrive. Something—or someone—else must come, not just to be counted, but to amount to something more than the sum of our parts. Something that does not simply inform us, but that transforms us.

And today, it does. *He* does. The surprise addition to the census; the child whom no one was counting on.

If we wish to begin to understand the significance of Jesus' birth and how this Christmas gospel begins to counter our empires of counting, we should take note of how his arrival is heralded. Not by an agent of the orderly government, but by an angel of light, by one who emanates from the expanse of a heavenly host more numerous than the stars. "A multitude," Luke's narrative tells us, and the Greek word is *plethos*, which connotes a number so large it is difficult to quantify.

And then we are told that this divine plethora delivers its message, not to the statisticians or the bureaucrats of Caesar, but to the shepherds in the fields. They are figures who are themselves barely considered countable, roaming elusively among fields and pastures at the edge of respectability or safety. These nameless, numberless shepherds are given a message that would likely have been ignored by larger, more august bodies: that the long-sought answer, the long awaited promise kept, is to be found in the most unlikely of places—in a manger, in a child, in the smallest fraction of possibility, nearly obscured by the margin of our errors.

The angels no one can count and the shepherds nobody bothers to count—these are God's chosen messengers. No census could ever account for it.

And yet this baby, this Jesus—he is perhaps the greatest surprise of all. For he is not just one of many, he is the One who made many. He is the One who, as the Psalmist says, *determines the number of the stars and gives to all of them their names*. He is the Uncountable One who has, for the sake of love, come to be counted, to submit himself to the census of our fears, to stare all our empires in the eye and forgive them, for they know not what they do. And on this day of his birth the ways in which he will do all of this are not yet revealed to us, but the story is set into motion, and the countdown to our transformation has begun anew in his newborn flesh.

This transformation is still at work in us, never more visible than in this season. Because the joy of Christmas is and always has been this: that despite all our attempts to categorize and commodify ourselves, God always manages to introduce an element of the immeasurable into our midst.

Just like the child whom we celebrate, Christmas itself refuses to yield itself entirely to our lists and our ledgers. Just when we become overburdened by the weight of expectations or regrets or the other ways we fear we don't quite measure up, suddenly there is a song in the night, and a burning star, and the old story retold, and although we may feel like just one of many in the teeming, trembling, transcendent history of the world, we remember that there is a fullness meant for us, too, and it is still seeking us, even now. It has a name and a face that we can call upon even when nothing else makes sense.

It is Jesus, and he, too, has come to be counted. And even more importantly, he has come to be counted *upon* by you and by me and by all who seek a life that is more than the sum of its parts.

And like the shepherds who first received this good news, Christmas is also an invitation for us to stand up, to go forth, and to be counted upon as well. To be counted upon as those who keep telling the story, who keep seeking the signs of a new Kingdom being born, and who will keep working to make this new Kingdom something more than a fleeting dream in the night.

Because the paradox of the Uncountable One becoming one of the counted suggests the opposite for us: that even in the finitude of our individual lives, there is an element of numberless eternity that abides and yearns to be born through our prayers and our actions. We are called not only to behold a birth but to give birth ourselves, through the labor of our hearts, to the tangible realities of glory and peace and justice and hope for the entirety of the *plethos*, the multitudes, who live on the face of the earth and who are still searching the heavens for something more than that which can be quantified.

Christmas is the enduring moment when that search was—and continues to be—answered. And the answer, for all creation, is the same as it was for Mary and Joseph:

You, who have traveled so very far, who have arrived in a place that barely feels like home, and who fear that you will be counted among the lost and the forgotten and the used up of this world—on this day, eternity has been born unto you; infinite love has condensed itself down to be as one for you, to be one with you, and to show you the way into a life that cannot be commodified or conquered. All we must do is seek him, and hold him, and stand with him.

And when we do, the story will reach its fullness all over again in our lives, just as it did on that night in Bethlehem: the ancient promise fulfilled, and the innumerable host of heaven singing its song, and something measureless welling up within us to be revealed.

And what is it? It is Love, having come to be counted.

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